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AUTHOR Friedrich, Gustav W.
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ABSTRACT

In the face of declining college enrollment and increased budget cuts, the speech communication department at the University of Nebraska devised a successful strategy to preserve and promote itself within the university. Outside authorities were selected for a department review committee. At the graduate level, the areas of concentration were reduced from seven to four to achieve an optimum balance of breadth and depth, and dual level and advanced level courses were offered on a rotating basis. To increase the low number of speech majors, students were allowed to tailor the program to a variety of career options, with cooperation from other departments. The introductory course format was changed to a modified mastery instructional mode to accommodate different learning styles, and the graduate and faculty teaching load was reduced. To keep the rest of the university informed of the changes in the department, each change was presented through a university committee, student course evaluations were reported, courses were colisted with those of other departments, and the department prepared a proposal to improve the written and oral communication skills of the university students with five other departments. The department also sponsors workshops, an internship program, and competitive and community debate to draw attention to the practical importance of speech communication. (HTH)

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PROMOTING THE DEPARTMENT WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY

Gustav W. Friedrich

Professor and Chairperson

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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The title of a recent research report sponsored by the American Association of Higher Education, The Three "R's" of the Eighties: Reduction, Reallocation and Retrenchment, epitomizes many educators fears for the immediate future.[1] There are many reasons for such concern. The national birthrate decline will produce 26 percent fewer 18-year-olds in 1994 than in 1979. Caught between declining enrollments and a taxpayer Proposition 13 mentality, higher education is increasingly forced to engage in cost cutting. When one considers soaring energy costs, inflation, a sagging economy, and the fact that the largest single item in educational budgets is salaries, it is easy to see why it is hard to remain optimistic. Reduction, reallocation, and retrenchment are an inescapable part of our future and, as a result, all academic departments must be able to, and will be asked to, justify their existence. This is especially true of departments of speech communication which, on most college and university campuses, lack the prestige accorded some of the more established disciplines (e.g., mathematics, physics, chemistry, English, philosophy).

In the ten to fifteen minutes allotted to me, I would like to share with you the University of Nebraska's (UNL) approach to coping with the bracing facts of the eighties. Making no claims for originality or generalizability, the strategy appears to be working for us. While not yet perceived as among the elite departments of the College of Arts and Sciences, our rankings by the College's Executive Committee have risen from 23rd of 23 units in 1976-77 to 14th of 23 units in 1979-80. What I propose to do, then, is present a case study of one department's attempt to preserve and promote itself within a university setting.

The strategy I will describe emerged in the process of preparing for a review which we solicited from UNL's Academic Planning Committee. Over the course of many long meetings during academic year 1977-78, the departmental faculty and two elected graduate student representatives verbalized departmental goals and attempted to be brutally frank in identifying assets and liabilities for achieving them. The end result was a 243 page "Self-Study Report" in which we described our program, our goals, current and needed resources, and our proposed strategies for program development.

A key element in establishing credibility for the results of the process was the selection of outside members for the review team. We devoted considerable time to the identification of five individuals whom we believed would do the best possible job of representing the discipline. The two eventually selected by the APC did not disappoint us.

In the process of focusing our attention on how we might best achieve our goal of becoming a strong research-oriented doctoral department while serving the teaching and service needs of the college, the campus, and the state, we thoroughly reviewed our graduate and undergraduate curriculum and eventually restructured both levels. At the graduate level, based on anticipated social and educational trends, departmental priorities and resources, and national expectations of the field, we reduced areas of concentration from seven to four in an attempt to achieve an optimum balance between breadth and depth for the program. By focusing on the areas of Communication Education, Interpersonal Communication, Organizational Communication, and Socio-Political Communication, and by scheduling introductory dual level courses (undergraduate/graduate) and advanced

graduate level seminars on a rotating three-year basis, we allowed the faculty to become more specialized, students to study areas in greater depth, and we projected a more focused image of the department's graduate program to the university community--an image that is less easily perceived as imperialistic.

At the undergraduate level, we were basically pleased with our service-course offerings. While we were somewhat concerned that too large a portion of our resources was devoted to them, we had a greater concern about the small number of students claiming speech communication as their major. Our attempt to remedy this consisted of allowing students to tailor their speech communication major or minor to a variety of career options (e.g., Public Relations, Pre-Law, Political Communication, Communication in Religion). This improvement was achieved with a minimal addition of advanced undergraduate level courses and by encouraging students to enroll in supporting courses in other departments. The results of this effort are beginning to show both in the form of increasing numbers of majors and minors--currently we have over sixty undergraduate majors as opposed to fewer than twenty less than two years ago--and in the good will generated in other departments as we talked with them about courses in their department that we would like our students to take.

Concurrent with these changes in curriculum content, we sought ways to increase both the efficiency and the quality of our instruction. One of our more successful efforts has been a change in format for our introductory course from a traditional to a modified mastery instructional mode (PSI/Keller). Keeping course objectives constant, the new format recognizes individual differences in learning style, provides students with

more individualized attention and undergraduate interns with an intense opportunity to learn about both speech communication and teaching, and allows the department to better utilize its resources. Preliminary data indicate that both students and instructors favor the new instructional approach. In addition, it has allowed us to improve our graduate program by reducing GTA teaching load from three courses to two. The success of the program has been watched with considerable interest by other units within the college and the departments of Sociology and Political Science are currently working on implementing PSI approaches to teaching their introductory courses.

Additional attempts to structure our program in a fashion providing maximum flexibility in balancing departmental teaching and research goals include the development of a modest number of large lecture courses and a course scheduling policy which produce two- or three-day teaching schedules for all faculty members. Such changes provide both the opportunity and the incentive to be more productive in performing the dual faculty role of researcher and teacher.

None of our attempts to strengthen the department's program could have an impact on university colleague's perceptions of us unless they became aware of the changes. Our basic approach to generating this awareness is one of personal contact and consultation. Illustrative of the approach: (1) As we made changes in our program, we treated each interaction with the appropriate university committee (e.g., the University Curriculum Committee) as an opportunity to describe and promote the department and discipline. (2) Regularly, we report student evaluations of our service courses to those units which require them, talk about course changes we are making, and

solicit and receive reactions. (3) In the process of implementing our undergraduate major, we interacted with many of the university's departments as we solicited their advice on which courses we ought to require of or recommend to our majors. (4) We worked out arrangements for co-listing courses with departments such as Journalism, Political Science, and Ethnic Studies. (5) Each fall semester we invite representatives from other departments on campus to visit with our graduate students and describe courses in their departments which our students might wish to take. (6) We cooperated with related departments on campus as we planned and built the extensive video- and audiotape capabilities of our newly developed Laase Communication Research Center. (7) We worked with five other units of the university in preparing a proposal describing a program to improve the written and oral communication skills of UNL's students.

Our many service activities, stimulated by the pragmatic importance of speech communication knowledge, provide another important arena for promoting the discipline. For example: (1) Each semester the department sponsors workshops to help individuals who are apprehensive or fearful about participating in communicative activities. (2) We have an active internship program which places our best undergraduate and graduate students in a wide variety of business and governmental settings. (3) The approximately eighty students in our forensics program are competitive at the national level and develop and present programs for a wide variety of university, community, and service organizations. (4) The department sponsors debates on issues of social, political, and economic import. This past year, for example, faculty members moderated debates between candidates for four of the state and congressional political contests. (5) Members of

the department present workshops which assist individuals who wish to improve their communication skills in such areas as public speaking, listening, and parliamentary procedure. (6) The department brings the discipline's best scholars to campus and makes an effort to involve other departments. In the past year, for example, we hosted the Seventh German-American International Colloquium on Speech Communication, the SCA/UNL Doctoral Honors Seminar in Rhetorical Theory, the Cornhusker Seminar in Argumentation, and will host the Nebraska Summer Conference on Conversation Analysis and Discourse Processes this summer. Our summer Visiting Professorship brings outstanding scholars to our campus each summer and, with the aid of the UNL Research Council, five visiting scholars were on our campus in the past three years.

In addition to these many service activities, we have also attempted to involve ourselves in the committe structure of the university. While serving on a variety of committees, and as both College and University Senate Parliamentarian, we make a special effort at cooperative attempts to improve undergraduate teaching. During the past three years, for example, the department received five Computer Assisted Instruction Program grants from Academic Computing Services to improve the quality of computer software and courseware for teaching and four Teaching Council grants to improve instruction, including a $2,500 grant to study "Student Perceptions of GTA Communication Effectiveness." The department also participated, with seven additional units of the College, in developing a $235,980 NSF CAUSE Proposal aimed at improving undergraduate science teaching through the development of resource centers. Faculty members are active in the Chowder Society (a faculty group devoted to improving instruction) and serve on the College

Curriculum Committee and the College Task Force to Study Undergraduate Instruction.

In addition to our informal attempts to publicize the department, we also work formally through the Office of University Information and through contacts with both university and community media. While the forensics program has been especially effective in securing publicity for its many activities, stories also appear on other aspects of the departmental program. In addition, we have a faculty member in charge of seeing that descriptions of faculty activities (e.g., publications, convention activities, professional offices) appear in a weekly university publication entitled UNL Bulletin Board.

By way of summary, then, our strategy for promoting the speech communication department at UNL involves (1) short-term and long-term planning to insure that our program is strong from the dual perspectives of the discipline and the mission of our university and (2) using both informal and formal channels to describe and promote our program. My hope is providing this brief case study of our efforts is that it will stimulate your creativity and that together we will be able to generate successful responses to the difficulties posed by the eighties.

Footnotes

[1]Kenneth P. Mortimer and Michael L. Tierney. The Three "R's" of the Eighties: Reduction, Reallocation and Retrenchment. AAHE-ERIC/ Higher Education Research Report No. 4. 1979.

Addendum

Sources for the reference to PSI/Keller (page 3) include the following:

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Spencer, Robert E. The Personalized System of Instruction--A New Idea in Higher Education. In Handbook on Teaching Educational Psychology. Ed. Donald J. Treffinger et al. N.Y.: Academic Press, 1977, pp. 243-62.